Approved For Release 2004/10/13 : CIA-RDP88-01350R000200390006-6

LONDON OBSERVER
May 12, 1968

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50c.4.01.2 Room 39
50c.4.01.2 The Codebreakers

How the US gave Rommel our secrets

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STARTLING facts about German and British intelligence activities in the Second World War are about to be revealed with Foreign Office approval.

Among the facts expected to be made public (well in advance of the time prescribed by the 30-year rule) are the Germans' deep penetration of British and American diplomatic traffic and of some vital British naval codes from 1936.

The penetration of diplomatic traffic meant that dispatches by Sir Neville Henderson, the British Ambassador in Berlin, were known in the Wilhelmstrasse almost as quickly as in Whitehall. The cracking of the naval codes was certainly responsible for early disasters in the Battle of the Atlantic, and probably for the failure to save Norway in 1940.

What promises to be the first of several books revealing the facts with official approval, appears this week —'Room 39.'* Its author is Donald McLachlan, former editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*, who served on the staff of the Director of Naval Intelligence from 1940-45.

McLachlan told me last week that the German lead in naval intelligence began during the Abyssinian War. 'The insecurity of British naval signals (or a lot of them) seems to have originated from a very simple situation in 1936, when we had a few warships in one place for a long period, in the Red Sea. The ships were on a war footing, exchanging the kind of signals that they would have exchanged in wartime, using their codes in conditions where it was possible for the enemy to collect sure information about the time of each signal, the destination of it, the name of the ship, the nature of the content, and so on.

He'll break code sooner or later

'Give a good code-cracker that much of a start—and the Germans were very good—and he'll break the code sooner or later. We didn't discover that the Germans had this great lead on us until the beginning of 1943.'

McLachlan referred to the revelation, made recently in 'The Code-Breakers' by an American, David Kahn, about the German intercception of dispatches to Washington from the American military attaché in Cairo, Colonel B. F. Fellers. McLachlan said: 'I think Fellers was given a lot of information by us, because we wanted American tanks, ammunition, and so on. So Rommel for quite a long time enjoyed excellent intelligence, from American sources, about the British Eighth Army—its dispositions, intentions, reinforcements, state of morale, and so on. But suddenly the British began to rumble that there was a substantial leak, and it was traced to the Fellers dispatches.'

'The Americans let him go on for a little and then, at the critical moment, suddenly stopped them—and the major German source of intelligence about the British went dead. This, of course, was of great assistance to Montgomery; and if what Mr Kahn says is true, then a fresh look is needed at the Battle of Alamein with all German, American and British intelligence sources available.

'In fact, the role of intelligence—on both sides—has been ignored by most official historians of the war. This is true of the victories as well as the failures.'

Lunch for U-boat prisoners

In his book, which takes its title from the nerve centre of Naval Intelligence in the Old Admiralty, McLachlan describes methods of interrogating German prisoners of war. For example, selected U-boat officer-prisoners would be taken to Simpson's restaurant in the Strand, given a fixed-price lunch, and shown round the City, which the Luftwaffe was supposed to have obliterated. McLachlan, says the treatment worked wonders, but that the expenses had often to be borne personally by the escorting British officers because of budgetary protests from the Admiralty.

Vital roles in the intelligence war were also played by naval attachés—British, German and neutral. For example, the British naval attaché in Madrid had the task of uncovering German and Italian activities near Gibraltar. A grounded Italian ship, the Olterra, had a compartment surreptitiously cut into her hull to contain midget submarines (smuggled [illegible]). These were used to sink shipping in Gibraltar harbour.

The British attaché also discovered German technicians setting up a radar station overlooking the Straits of Gibraltar: the Spanish authorities were officially told and stopped the project. Even so, when it came to mounting 'Torch,' the North African landing, it was impossible to disguise the inevitable accumulation of shipping in the Straits.

'The German agents were able to sit on the Spanish side and watch, count, report back. So the decision was taken *not* to disguise the size of this armada, but to mislead them as to where it was going, and the ruse succeeded completely.'

Before the Normandy invasion, the greatest pains were taken to conceal the plan for constructing Mulberry artificial harbours (and thus the Allies' intention to land far from any major port). But an unexpected problem arose because of the vigilance of the Swedish naval attaché, Count Oxenstjerna, who had asked to visit part of the Thames estuary where the Mulberries were being built. If he saw them he would realise their purpose, and although his neutrality and good will were unquestioned, it was thought necessary to have the Swedish Government recall him to rule out any possibility of a leak.

McLachlan explains in his book how Oxenstjerna's recall was achieved under delicate circumstances; and it was only after the war that the puzzled Swedish officer was allowed to know that it was his professional efficiency alone which had been the reason.

The next major book to throw light on the intelligence war is expected to deal with a German report on British foreign policy between Munich and the outbreak of war. The German report is now being edited, with Foreign Office help, by Mr D. C. Watt, of London University, and the writer, David Irving. The report, prepared by Goering's so-called Research Office, is believed to include extensive intercepts of Allied and neutral diplomatic cables, and was discovered after the war in the archives of the German Post Office.

*** *Room 39,' to be published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 50s.***

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